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AUTHOR Inger, Morton
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ABSTRACT

In most schools, especially urban high schools, teachers are colleagues in name only. Some schools, however, do foster substantial collegial relationships among teachers; and when schools are organized to support such teacher collaboration, the benefits are substantial. To make teacher collaboration possible and effective, two fundamental conditions appear to be crucial: interdependence and opportunity. Since teachers' main motivation and rewards are in the work of teaching, the extent that they find themselves interdependent with one another to manage and reap the rewards of teaching make joint work a worthwhile investment of time and other resources. Joint action, however, will not occur where it is prohibitively costly in organizational, political, or personal terms; school policy must support the effort, and the value placed on shared work must be stated and demonstrated. Helping teacher collaboration to work requires endorsements and rewards for collaborative efforts, school-level reorganization into teams to stimulate cooperative work, the willingness to give latitude to teachers for influence on matters of curriculum and instruction, enough time for planning periods and implementation, training and assistance, and the support of quality materials and equipment. (Contains seven references.) (GLR)

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TEACHER COLLABORATION IN URBAN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Many current major educational reforms call for meaningful, extensive collaboration among teachers—collaboration that goes well beyond their requesting and offering advice to one another. Teachers are expected to work together to alter the curriculum and pedagogy within subjects, such as infusing a multicultural perspective; and to make connections between subjects, such as integrating academic and vocational education.

Benefits of Teacher Collaboration

In most schools, especially urban high schools, teachers are colleagues in name only. Some schools, however, do foster substantial collegial relationships among teachers, and when schools are organized to support such teacher collaboration the benefits are substantial.

Improvements in Student Behavior and Achievement

Teachers who work together have seen significant improvements in student achievement, behavior, and attitudes. In schools where collaboration is the norm, students can sense program coherence and consistency of expectations, and their improved behavior and achievement may well be a response to a better learning environment. Urban career academies and theme schools, where teachers must plan together to develop a unified program, are examples of successful collaborations.

Increased Teacher Satisfaction and Adaptability

Teacher collaboration in urban schools breaks the isolation of the classroom, leads to increased feelings of effectiveness and satisfaction, and to "a more elaborate and exciting notion of . . . teaching" (Popkewitz & Myrdal, 1991, p. 35). For beginning teachers, this collegiality saves them from the usual sink-or-swim, trial-and-error ordeal. For experienced teachers, collegiality prevents end-of-year burnout and stimulates enthusiasm. For teachers in urban schools in particular, who are faced with fiscal crises and a variety of student problems, the risk of burnout is especially great. In such schools, collaboration helps teachers cope better and get more control over their daily work lives.

Over time, teachers who work closely together become more adaptable and self-reliant. Together, they have the energy, organizational skills, and resources to attempt innovations that would exhaust an individual teacher. The complexities introduced by a new curriculum in an urban school or by the need to refine an existing one are challenging. Teacher teamwork makes these complex tasks more manageable, stimulates new ideas, and promotes coherence in a school's curriculum and instruction. In short, the collaborative environment fosters continuous learning by the teachers that enhances their effectiveness in the classroom.

Barriers to Collaboration

Despite the advantages of teacher collaboration, there are substantial barriers to it, and the barriers are of many kinds.

Norms of Privacy

A school faculty is an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals. Teachers usually see each other at odd moments before the school day begins, between periods, at lunch, and at occasional after-school meetings. More formally, they see one another during an assigned preparation period. Because teacher autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and non-interference, most teachers feel that other teachers' activities are "none of my business."

Subject Affiliation and Departmental Organization

Most secondary schools are organized by subject matter, and most teachers view themselves as subject matter specialists. The subject gives teachers a frame of reference, a professional identity, and a community, all reinforced by the teachers' preparation, state curriculum frameworks, standardized test protocols, textbook design, university admission requirements, and teacher licensing requirements.

Working within departments organized by subject, teachers affiliate with others in the same field in professional associations and informal networks. Inevitably, the privacy in which teachers work—the insularity of the classroom—sustains their stereotypes regarding the nature and importance of subjects other than their own. Thus, the capacity of teachers to pursue new curricular and organizational forms is limited not only by their relative isolation from one another during the school day, but also by subject and departmental boundaries. Some departments, to be sure, foster collegiality within the department, but teachers traditionally have scant basis, opportunity, or reason for meaningful collaboration with teachers in other departments.

Barriers between Vocational and Academic Teachers

Another set of barriers stands between vocational and academic teachers. Vocational and academic education are, particularly in the urban comprehensive high school, two different worlds, separated organizationally, physically, educationally, and socially. The formal organization of the school and the patterns of isolation or involvement that develop among colleagues reinforce the separation between vocational and academic teachers.

Academic disciplines have higher status, command greater institutional respect, and compete more successfully for resources. These differences are sustained by the value attached to the two different student bodies in the two curricular tracks. Preparation of college-bound students sets

the standard, marginalizing the non-college-bound along with their teachers and curricula.

The social and organizational isolation of most vocational teachers is exacerbated by the physical separation and programmatic fragmentation in secondary schools. Vocational facilities are in different parts of the school from academic classrooms. Often, there is no single space that is either large enough to hold the disparate teaching groups or congenial enough to attract them.

Teacher Collaboration: Helping It Work

Despite the obstacles, meaningful collaboration is taking place in some urban high schools. Support for teacher collegiality and collaboration has six dimensions.

1. Endorsements and Rewards

Teachers work together best in schools where the principal and other leaders convey their belief that interdisciplinary teams serve students better. Vague slogans in favor of collaboration are ineffective; leaders must spell out in detail why they believe collaboration is important.

2. School-Level Organization of Assignments and Leadership

School-level reorganization into teams stimulates cooperative work, but does not guarantee it. For teams to be effective, leadership must be broadly distributed among teachers and administrators. In some schools, for example, teachers are given reduced teaching loads in exchange for leading curriculum development work.

3. Latitude Given to Teachers for Influence on Matters of Curriculum and Instruction

Teachers' investment in team planning rests heavily on the latitude they have for making decisions in areas of curriculum, materials selection, instructional grouping, and student assessment. Indeed, teachers need to be involved in the development of the goals and objectives of the collaborative efforts. Teaming for the sake of teaming leads to disillusionment; teams should be created to deal with matters of compelling importance.

4. Time

Opportunities for collaborative work are either enhanced or eroded by the master schedule. Schools must foster cooperative work among teachers by establishing common planning periods and regularly scheduled team or subject area meetings, and providing released time for these activities. Further, time for staff development must be free from the distractions of the day-to-day routine of school operations.

5. Training and Assistance

Since cooperative work places unfamiliar demands on teachers, schools must provide them with task-related training and assistance to help them master the specific skills needed for collaboration, develop explicit agreements to govern their work together, and gain confidence in their ability to work with one another outside the classroom.

6. Material Support

The quality and availability of reference texts and other materials, consultants on selected problems, adequate copying equipment, and other forms of human and material support are crucial to teachers' ability and willingness to work together successfully.

Summary and Conclusions

Serious collaboration in urban schools—teachers engaging in the rigorous mutual examination of teaching and learning—is rare, and where it exists, it is fragile. Yet it does occur, and the enthusiasm of teachers about their collaborations is persuasive.

To make teacher collaboration possible and effective, two fundamental conditions appear to be crucial: interdependence and opportunity. The practices of colleagues are most likely to make a difference where they are an integral, inescapable part of day-to-day work. Teachers' main motivations and rewards are in the work of teaching. To the extent that they find themselves interdependent with one another to manage and reap the rewards of teaching, joint work will be worth the investment of time and other resources.

Joint action will not occur where it is prohibitively costly in organizational, political, or personal terms. If teachers are to work often and fruitfully as colleagues, school policy must solidly support it. Schedules, staff assignments, and access to resources must be made conducive to shared work. The value that is placed on shared work must be both said and demonstrated. The purpose for it must be compelling and the task sufficiently challenging. And the accomplishments of individuals and groups must be recognized and celebrated.

— **Morton Inger**

Recommended Reading

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education, Institute for Urban and Minority Education, Box 40, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027, (212) 678-3433. Erwin Flaxman, Director. Wendy Schwartz, Managing Editor.

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